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ABSTRACT

The office of the Ombudsman for Swedish children, established within Radda Barnen (The Swedish Save the Children Fund) is occupied by five persons. Three of the staff are children's ombudsmen, one is an immigrant consultant, and one is a refugee consultant. The work of the ombudsman has six core aspects. First, attempts are made to strengthen the legal rights of the child. Second, information about children's needs and rights is disseminated to decision makers, professionals who work with children, parents, and others. Third, educational activities are conducted primarly for professionals who work with children and especially in areas in which central or local governments do too little, such as child abuse. Fourth, support is provided for research about children and their situation. Fifth, a telephone service is provided for individual cases involving child abuse, child care, and child custody. Sixth, projects are implemented that aim to change people's opinions and develop models that others can use. For example, an attempt has been made to develop a model for improving the attitudes of Swedish and immigrant children toward each other. Projects on violence in mass-media, the anti-spanking law, and needs of hospitalized children either have been or are being conducted. (A list of eight reasons on why not to spank a child is appended). (Author/PM)

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Rädda Barnen
1981-04-28 ML

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Bo Carlsson
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The Children's Ombudsman - a spokesman for children

The swedish Children's Ombudsman is employed by Rädda Barnen - Swedish Save the Children - which was founded in 1919. Rädda Barnen is a voluntary organisation concerned with the welfare of children. Some 200.000 Swedes give Rädda Barnen their vote of confidence as members, donors and sponsors.

Rädda Barnen activities consist of

- development programmes and emergency assistance outside Sweden in co-operation with Intergovernmental and other international organisations,

as well as local goverments in developing countries,

- information and fund raising campaigns as well as development education aimed at increasing international understanding of children's needs,

- work for children in Sweden and abroad, focusing on public awareness programmes, research regarding children's welfare, and advocasy for children's rights through the Children's Ombudsman.

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That the Children's Ombudsman is employed by Rädda Barnen means that the Ombudsman is working outside the state administration and therefore has no legal rights or possibilities to intervene in individual cases with the law as a base. From my point of view this is however an advantage. We are by reason of that, not dependent on the frames and the dependency that automatically follows from being a goverment body. Simplifying it one can say that our possibilities to influence laws, administrative and political

decisions depends on the knowledge and the arguments we can offer. At the same time it is of course possible for us to work with opinionmaking in an active way if necessary.

The aim of the Children's Ombudsman is to be a spokesman for children. A spokesman who can assert pressure on decision-makers as well as supply knowledge to parents and professionals who work with and for children. A moulder of public opinion who works to strengthen the rights of the child and convince adults to better meet the needs of the child.

One may of course ask oneself why a Children's Ombudsman is needed in such a developed and rich country as Sweden. A country that belonges to the richest in the world, that is known for its social reforms and that has managed to reduce mortality and accidents among children to perhaps the lowest figure in the world. I do however want to assert that many

children in our affluent society have the same degree of risk as many children in the poor countries. It is true that you can't see the wounds on the outside, but you find them inside the children. Let me give you just a few examples:

- 11% of the swedish 11 year olds who were questioned in a study about children in five countries said that no grown-up ever liked them. Try to consider what this feeling means - that no other adult likes you. No children in the other countries (Spain, Israel, Algeria and Ethiopia) gave this answer to the same question.

- In a survey of swedish four year olds it was found that 20-25% showed signs of psycho-social problems.

- Divorces in our country, as in most other industrialised countries, are frequent. Some researchers calculate that in the future, every second

marriage will end in a divorce. At the same time we continue to move a lot and the tendency to do less and less together with others outside the family seems to be increasing. Considered together it is a great risk that this means that children have few or no adults to lean against outside the small family. You do not need much imagination to understand what this can lead to.

- A lot of children are taken into care. About 1% of the children in Sweden under 15 years of age are in fosterhomes. Unfortunately some of them are shuffled between different homes. That eight year olds are forced to live in ten different homes during their short lives is to me nothing but child abuse. Abuse that the society to a great extent is responsible for.

The Children's Ombudsman is not only one person but there are alltogether five of us. Three Children's Ombudsmen, one immigrant consultant and one refugee consultant. Even if the personel in the office come from different fields and have different education we have of course not all the knowledge that is necessary. We have therefore both a social committee and a research committee where there are specialist of different kinds such as lawyers, pediatricians, psychologists and so forth.

The aim of our work can be summarised in six different points:

1) We work to strengthen the legal rights of the child. This we do by working out our own proposals as well as working together with goverment bodies. My predecessor, Rigmor von Euler, is for example a member of the Committee on Children's Rights which Bertil Ekdahl has informed you about. Most proposals from goverment committees that deal with questions that have a bearing on children are referred to us for consideration. In that way we have a possibility to influence the goverment

and the Parliament. Of course we also work with opinionmaking in these questions. An example of a proposal worked out within Rädda Barnen is an alternative text for a Convention on the Rights of the Child.

2) We try to spread information about childrens needs and rights to both decisionmakers, professionals who work with children, parents and others. This is done through information-material that we distribute free of charge and through the mass media and also by more and more frequent lecturing. The lectures are often given in universities or other schools but also to people in different voluntary organisations.

3) We have gone in for education, primarily of professionals who work with children, expecially in areas where we mean that the central or local goverments do too little. One such area is child abuse where we since several years have tried to spread the latest knowledge to different professionals. This year we will invite lawyers and the subject

will be children at risk. The swedish curriculum for law-education contains almost nothing about children and their needs. At the same time lawyers are more and more often handling cases where the decision has a major impact on the child. We have also since a couple of years courses about immigrants and their cultures. Material for education is also produced and can be used free of charge by different schools or universities.

4) We support research about children and their situation. Rädda Barnen has naturally no big funds for research, but has the aim to support projects that aim at prevention and are within the psycho-social field. One summary of a project supported by Rädda Barnen is available in english and is called "Children at Risk in the Affluent Society". It is a project about children in so called multi-problem families. Other projects are about traffic-education in school, violence on TV and development of the personality of deaf children.

With the aim of making the results from research known, we have started further education and information about what different researchers have found. We invite pediatricians, psychologists, social workers, teachers and so forth and let the researchers present their findings to professionals who can utilize the results.

Rädda Barnen has since it was founded in 1919 worked with the aim of lowering the violence children are exposed to. During IYC we arranged an international conference on Violence towards Children. A report named Children and Violence is obtainable for those interested. The conference was preceded by an international survey about violence towards children.

We are also trying to establish and develop contacts with different universities and researchers in various parts of the world to be able to obtain more and better information on violence towards children.

5) We have a telephone service for individual cases. Both professionals and ordinary people use this. It is primarily three different types of questions that dominate this service. First it is child abuse. Many people unfortunately will not report child abuse to the local authorities as they are not sure if they can be anonymous. We can then take upon ourselves to report the cases to the social workers. Of course we first try to make the person who contacts us to make the report themselves as this makes the coming investigation easier. Also social workers, school welfare officers, nurses and others contact us about child abuse. In these cases they often want to discuss treatment or ask about the legislation.

The second most common type of case is children in care. As I mentioned before many of these children are moved between different homes. The reasons for this are several, but this leads beyond todays subject. It is however hard for an individual, whether it is a biological parent or a

fosterparent to get support from someone outside when a decision or a suggestion from a local social board goes against what they think - right or wrong - is best for the child. We can then be someone to discuss the case with, give information about the legal possibilities and rights and when we find it suitable and necessary, try to make the authorities change a recommendation or decision.

The third most common type of cases relate to conflicts about custody. In these cases often one parent who feels wrongly treated calls us. Our aim is always the childs best and in these cases we often try to make the calling parent overcome his or her aggressions towards the other parent so that the child, despite the divorce can have some security. Our role in these cases is mostly to listen and inform about what legal rights the parents have.

To try to make it a bit more concrete I would like to tell you about three different cases.

The first one is about a girl who rang and told us that her parents sometimes spanked her but it was absolutely not serious and not a question of child abuse. She wanted to get in contact with someone she could talk to and who in the first phase could support her. In this case we contacted a school welfare officer in a school close to her own, who took over the case. They initially met a couple of times to agree on how to go on. This was of course for us a simple case in the sense that we very easily could provide what the girl asked for. How the situation will evolve in the end we do not yet know.

Another case is about a child who had a very bad family situation. The child was abused in several ways. The local socialworker knew of this but had not done anything. After we had talked to the socialworker still

nothing happened. The next step was to write to the local political social board and tell them the whole story. The girl was taken into care and placed in a fosterhome. At the same time an agreement was made that the biological parents could only meet the child under certain circumstances and at certain times. This was however not respected and the social board did nothing to see to that the agreement was implemented. At the moment we are discussing a report to the Parliamentary Ombudsman in whos mandate it is to control that the authorities conform to the laws.

A third case is about a boy who has been in care for about seven years. His contact with his biological mother had during this period been sporadic. The swedish law implies however that if the situation in the home improves considerable and the improvement is expected to be continuous the child shall be moved home. The mother had now married again and lived an ordinary life. She asked for termination of the care and requested that the boy should be moved home to her. The court approved. The boy, who is

now 11 years old refused however. He wanted to stay with his fosterparents who he sees as his real parents. The court now enjoined the fosterparents to leave the child to the mother. Otherwise they would be fined. The fosterparents tried to persuade the boy to move to his mother, but he still refused. At the same time the fosterparents decided not to use force to move the boy. The court ruled on a new date for the handing over and raised the fine. If the boy was not moved the police would come and get him. The fosterparents tried once again to persuade the boy and contacted a psychologist. The fosterparents lawyer contacted the central Social Authority. All psychological experts that had a say in the case meant that the boy would suffer psychologicly from being moved by force. We were contacted in this case - I can't tell how. We contacted the persons involved and nobody seemed to want to give up their position. The court was to decide if the boy should be taken by the police in a few days. I turned to the mass-media and threatened to report the court for child abuse if they

decided to move the boy by force. It all finished by the court deciding that the boy could stay in the fosterhome but at the same time the boy and the mother shall extend their contacts and psychological expertis shall help to build up a confident relationship between the boy and the mother. The hope is that the boy in the end shall want to move home.

These three cases are naturally only a small selection from all the cases we get each year but I hope it gives you a glimpse of our work in this field.

6) We carry through projects both to try to change peoples opinion and to work out models that others can use. A project of the latter kind is an attempt to work out models that can be used for improving the attitudes between swedish children and immigrant children.
As I said before the question of violence towards children is a top priority for us. In 1975 Rädda Barnen started a campaign against violence concentrating this time on mass-media. Since then we have continued with different projects in this field. Our latest work in this field concerns violence in the media with special emphasis on video. We have also only a couple of weeks ago carried through an opinion-poll about swedes attitudes towards spanking. This poll shows that 96% of the swedes know about the anti-spanking law. 71% say that it is not necessary to use spanking in bringing up children. Unfortunately another 26% still believe in using violence towards children for educational reasons. One can also see that there is a continuum over the generations in the acceptance of violence. If you yourself have been brought up with spanking, there is a greater risk you think it necessary to spank your own children.

The Children's Ombudsman can for obvious reasons not work with all questions that relate to children. For several reasons we have concentrated on questions concerning violence towards children, immigrant children,

children in hospital and children at risk.

The work of the Children's Ombudsman is long-term, exept our help to individual children. Therefore it is also hard to say anything about the impact of our work. Let me however mention one project where we directly have been able to see the results. That is children in hospital. In the mid-seventies we started a big campaign where members of Rädda Barnen together with personel in the hospitals screened the situation of children in every hospital in Sweden. This survey eminated into demands for play-therapy, for a possibility for parents to sleep with the children and visit them whenever they wanted, for children of school-age to receive education also when in hospital. Today these suggestions are put into practice in most hospitals children's clinics and Sweden is the only country on earth that has a law that gives children a right to play-therapy during their time in hospital.

The Children's Ombudsmans work is aimed at improving society so that every child can grow up with security and get a chance to develop into a harmonious adult. To get there a lot has to be done. Perhaps the most important point is that adults start to give priority to children and children needs and see children as a positive resourse. We also need to develop a solidarity and responsability for each other and decrease the direct and indirect violence that children are exposed to. Violence breeds violence is a rather accepted thesis. If we want the growing generation to form a better world built on nonviolence and respect we have to instill these values today in our children.

Thank you!

Rädda Barnen
1981-04-29 ML
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EIGHT REASONS NOT TO SPANK A CHILD

- A child who is spanked learns that someone who is bigger has the right to correct someone who is smaller with violence. This they of course use themselves towards their peers.

- A child who is spanked feels fear for the adult. In time this fear very easily turns into disrespect and hate which is a bad ground for cooperation, understanding and love later in life.

- A child who is spanked is more likely to hit his own children.

- A child who is spanked for educational reasons runs a higher risk to be abused when the parent is at stress, than the child who is normally fostered without violence.

- A child who is spanked for educational reasons does not learn what the parent wants him to learn. A small child cannot as grown-ups see and understand the background for the punishment. The child often only see the actual situation.

- A child who is spanked feels that he has not the same right as adults namely not to be physicly attacked. If men and women walk around hitting each other they are persecuted but if they hit their own child they are only doing their job.

- A child who is spanked is taught violence, not love. To believe that you can foster someone to love with violence is not only false but absurd.

- There are some basic human rights that should be valid for everybody, even the most vulnerable human being. The right to be able to grow up without being physicly attacked, is one of them.